

Needle and a Knife by Lafayette1777

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Genre: But not explicit, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Pining, Teenage Losers Club (IT), Teenage Shenanigans, because killing clowns is stressful, everybody has anxiety, many cassettes are exchanged, takes place right after summer 1989 until the end of summer 1990

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Summary:

It takes a year for the Losers to begin to fall apart. Meanwhile, Richie pines.

Needle and a Knife

Author's Note:

me @myself: really??? the fucking clown movie got you??? whatever

anyways i love the losers and now i have to go mourn their childhood and by extension my own because tomorrow is my 21st birthday and i'm having an age crisis

thanks for reading!!! <3

Little boys are all knees and elbows, sweat and blood. Crunching knuckles and earth upturned by spitting feet. A version of this truth becomes clear to Richie shortly before his face makes contact with the dirt.

“Holy fuck,” he says, grass clinging to his lips. “That was amazing.”

His bike lays a few feet to his left, mostly intact. It’s him who took the beating—vaulting over the handlebars when the shakily constructed ramp they knocked up out of scrap wood gave out in the middle of an Evil Knievel-style leap. He’d taken flight, briefly—if he’d had a little more time he might even have been able to spread his arms out wide, embrace the ground before it embraced him.

“Richie, you good?” It’s Eddie, looking down at him from the top of what was once their ramp. His white shoes perch on the edge of a crumbling cinderblock. The rest of the Losers have dropped their bikes as well and trotted over to observe the carnage.

“Fuck yeah,” says Richie, then turns to spit blood, more for dramatic effect than anything else. Eddie recoils.

“Does that need stitches?”

Richie touches his bottom lip, feels the promise of swelling and not much else. “Are you offering the services of Dr. K? Free of charge?”

“Mouth wounds are prone to infection, asshole.”

Eddie is scowling now, his head haloed in light from the noon sun. And Richie, looking up at him, has one of those moments where he thinks it might be safer to climb out of his own skin and sprint for some far away world than to stay here and indulge his own thoughts. Or, in truth, just this thought: there's never been anyone like *him*.

"I think you should leave the concern over my oral health to your mother," says Richie.

He shoves himself to his feet, looks hard down at the ground, and misses the unimpressed expression on Eddie's face when he deadpans, "Wow. Good one."

Richie claps his hands together. "Alright, my good chaps, who's next?"

Eddie mutters something about doing the *fucking British guy* and gets back on his bike.

As it turns out, Richie's own bike has weathered the jump less well than he initially assessed. By the end of the afternoon, the front tire has sprung enough of a leak to make it unrideable. In solidarity, the others walk their bikes back to town alongside him rather than riding ahead. It's the last warm weekend of the year, and school has just begun—without Bev, though she writes to both Ben and Bill regularly, sending regards to the other four in affectionate postscripts. The days are already getting shorter, a chill drifting through the air in the swift twilights. Their summer is over, Richie knows, wondering if one day he'll remember fondly all of its myriad terrors.

"We'll have to brace the sides with something," Ben is saying to Mike, already plotting tomorrow's renewed assault on their attempt at a dirt bike course. "I'll see if I can't find some bricks."

"Maybe we s-should go to the quarry one last time," says Bill. "Before it gets too cold."

“It’ll probably already be freezing,” Stan says.

“Yeah, I’m not supposed to be swimming anyways,” Eddie adds, waving his right arm, recently released from its cast.

“You’re both pussies,” Richie says. “And there’s no reason you can’t swim with an arm that isn’t even in a cast anymore.”

“They told me it’s delicate—”

“That’s total bullshit—”

Stan rolls his eyes and interjects with, “Whatever, we’ll go to the quarry, just please shut the fuck up.”

In the last of the day’s receding light, Richie drops his bike long enough to dance over and pinch Eddie’s supposedly delicate arm, earning himself a swipe at the back of his head in retaliation. The street, when they start walking again, is cast in blue shadow. They grow quiet, all of them, as they come into town, where a stillness has descended. The silence in Derry has always been different, somehow. A kind of hum exists beneath it, inside it, waiting for release.

The fucking clown is gone, Richie thinks, perhaps a little desperately. We killed it. It’s not coming back for us. For any of us.

In the morning, Eddie arrives on his stoop punctually, waiting with an impatient frown for Richie to shove his feet into untied shoes.

“When’s your bike gonna be fixed?” he asks, watching Richie carefully as he trots down the stairs.

“Whenever they get the part in, I don’t fucking know,” Richie replies. “Are you saying you don’t want to be my chauffeur, Eds?”

“Call me that again and you can fucking walk.”

Richie snorts as he steps over the back wheel of Eddie’s bike and

perches above him, settling his elbows on Eddie's shoulders. He's close enough to smell the fabric softener in his polo, to see the pink glow of sunburn along the part in his hair.

"Are you holding on tight enough?" Eddie asks. "I will not be responsible for you bouncing your head off the asphalt."

"Is this tight enough?" asks Richie, and pretends to strangle him.

Eddie calls him a dickhead, but Richie can see the way the top his cheek curves into a smile.

As Richie knows, the most efficient method of getting someone's attention is to make a serious attempt to drown him beneath the resplendently green water of the quarry. This keeps him and Eddie entertained long enough for Mike to find a turtle, which segues the afternoon into one spent constructing a turtle home on the bank of a nearby stream. Ben sketches out a design for a miniature, turtle-sized lean-to in the sand while Stan and Bill are sent on a scouting mission for suitable building materials. Richie is given turtle-sitting duty, and the creature seems content to sun itself on the top of his bare thigh.

Richie leans back against the bank and watches the tops of the trees sway in an indifferent, high-altitude breeze. Somewhere to his left, he can hear Eddie splashing through the shallows, turning over the occasional rock, and he's comforted by the sound, the proximity of it, the way it assures him of Eddie's presence without either of them having to say a word. This, he thinks, is probably the summer they were meant to have.

"I have a present for you," says Eddie, his face briefly blotting out the sun before he drops a live snail on Richie's neck.

"Almost as slimy as your mother's underwear after I—"

"Ugh, never mind," says Eddie, rolling his eyes and plopping down next to him on the sand. "Also, I think I have blood poisoning."

“Really? Let me see.” Richie flicks the snail off his skin and readjusts the turtle so he can sit up and take a look at Eddie’s proffered arm. It turns out to be just a patch of dry skin, reddened by itching, across the soft crook of his elbow. Richie pokes it a few times, for good measure, and because Eddie offers no resistance to the touch.

“Oh yeah, you’ll be dead by morning,” Richie says, leaning back with a grin.

Eddie looks unsurprised as he reaches up to scratch absently at the spot. His eyes are on the water, or perhaps where Richie’s feet are dipping into it, creating ripples with every twitch of his toes.

“Don’t scratch it,” Richie says. “You’ll only make it worse. Ladies don’t like a man with reptile skin.”

Eddie meets his eyes and scratches harder.

“Christ,” says Richie. “Hold this.”

He hands Eddie the turtle and gets to his feet, returning a moment later with two broad, green leaves dipped in cool water. Eddie holds out his arm, expectant—trusting, actually, thinks Richie. Then he presses the leaves against the patch of redness, quieting the burn, and Eddie raises no objections to whatever dirt or bacteria is no doubt saturating into his skin.

“Better?” asks Richie, squatting beside him, careful to keep his eyes pointed down on the curve of Eddie’s arm. He can feel the intensity of the gaze on him, can imagine the two lines between Eddie’s eyebrows and the darkness of brown eyes in the waning afternoon light, without having to look up.

“Yeah,” says Eddie, handing the turtle back.

Autumn arrives early and strong the next weekend. Richie finds that all of last year’s coats now expose several inches of his pale wrists to the elements. Somewhere in these last few months he’s become the

tallest Loser, which he supposes is an accomplishment, if only because it gives him something else to torture Eddie about.

But he can run faster with longer legs and there's something to be said for that. Even with Bowers and Hockstetter gone, they are still marked as Losers. Still eternally on the run, from someone or something, always more out than in.

(He records a Teen Queens song off the oldies station, writes Led Zeppelin on the cassette, tosses it in a drawer and vows to listen to it again in another lifetime.)

It snows for the first time in October. Richie pulls on the tassels on Eddie's wool hat and nearly brains himself slipping on the icy sidewalk as he jumps on the back of Eddie's bike before he pulls away.

"How is yours *still* not fixed?" Eddie asks, breath pluming white in the air as they coast down a hill.

"I'm not a fucking bike mechanic, Eddie Spaghetti, how should I know?" says Richie, stretching his arms out to catch the wind. "No hands!"

Eddie swerves back and forth across the road until Richie is forced to grab onto him again.

Mrs. Kaspbrak is not expecting Eddie back until dinner due to his pretending to join the French club this year. Monday and Wednesday afternoons have become their domain, a land promised only to the two of them. They kill time around town when the weather's good or at Richie's house when it's not. The others are almost always tied up with real extracurriculars or work or homework; Richie doesn't need to see snow to know that the summer is over, that unity exists only in the brief landscape of childhood. He's seen the way bone can splinter —believes, even, that it can be a natural process.

"Your sheets are full of cat hair," Eddie says, surveying Richie's unmade bed. "You're gonna get feline fucking leukemia."

"What?" says Richie, throwing his coat and scarf in a corner and

sprawling across the bed. “That’s not a real thing. You just made that up, didn’t you?”

Eddie sits gingerly down on the end of the bed and launches into a lengthy explanation of the retrovirus. The Tozier family cat, Martin, makes a point of settling in his lap a moment later. Richie reaches for the radio on his night stand, flipping through the stations until he settles on Sonic Youth, waiting for Eddie to object. But for once there’s no reaction. Eddie leans back against the wall, eyes far away.

“Bill told me something,” Eddie says, in the pause between songs.
“He said he wasn’t certain but he was pretty sure.”

Richie uses petting Martin as an excuse to arrange himself closer to Eddie. A poster crinkles as he lays back against the same wall, their shoulders touching. “What?”

“That his parents want to move to New Hampshire before the end of the year.”

“No way.” Richie shakes his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“I do,” Eddie says, shrugging. “It’s the Georgie thing.”

“Yeah,” says Richie. “But still.”

Eddie has the sleeves of his pullover rolled up to the elbow, revealing the scar, red and raised, where the pins had gone in to fix his arm. Richie wants to touch it, feels almost unbearably compelled to, but scratches Martin beneath the chin instead. Horrible though it is, the scar feels like a necessary reminder that there ever was a summer, that they survived it, that they were all together. Outside, the world turns white with snow.

The Denbroughs are gone by Thanksgiving. It’s so quick Richie almost can’t believe it—he’s lived two streets away from Bill his whole life. He bikes past the house again and again, expecting to see Bill’s bike flung in a snow drift in the front yard, and finds only the

dull-eyed stares of darkened windows. The last time he does this, it's nearly dark, and he finds himself so spooked on the ride back to his own home that he never pedals down Bill's street again.

Then it's Ben, announcing that he's been offered a scholarship at a private school in Vermont with a prestigious design program. When he tells them he phrases it like a question, as if seeking their approval, and in the stunned silence after the announcement Mike is the first one to recover.

"That's amazing, Ben," he says, slapping him on the shoulder. "You have to go. No doubt about it."

"I'll keep in touch," Ben says. "And I'll come visit, in the summers. Like Bill and Bev are going to. It'll be just like last summer."

"Minus the clown," says Richie, and no one laughs.

They're in the clubhouse and thawed snow is dripping through the rafters. Eddie twitches every time a splotch of muddy water appears on the floor plank beside where he sits. His knee bumps against Richie's, and Richie realizes he's holding his breath, perhaps has always been, and wonders if he'll ever know how to stop.

Richie spends Purim with the Uris family and after the meal they retreat to Stan's attic bedroom, perched above the rest of the house like a nest. Binoculars sit on the windowsill, poised in expectation of the appearance of a rare bird on the birch tree whose branches scrape the side of the house. They dutifully hunch over biology homework before Richie loses interest and instead turns to perusing Stan's comic collection for something unread. Behind him, he can hear the scratch of Stan's pencil, the flick of a turning page.

Richie turns, holding a Spiderman comic aloft. "Is this the one where the Green Goblin—?"

But Stan has frozen, his eyes on the dark window, homework cast aside.

“Stan the Man,” Richie says. “You okay?”

Stan doesn’t move, and that’s when Richie hears it—the quick patter of feet outside. But that’s not what it is. No. Richie crosses to the window, cups his hands so he can peer out into the night, and sees only a surprised looking bat alight briefly on the windowsill before flying off.

“It’s nothing,” Richie says, turning back to Stan. “It’s okay.”

Stan shakes his head, grips his pencil tighter.

“You’re not going anywhere, are you?” Stan asks, eyes wide. Richie is not sure if he’s talking about leaving his house for the night or Derry in general. He thinks about the moment at Neibolt when they realized that that fucking clown had its teeth in Stan, the moment when they weren’t sure if he was alive or dead. There’s no way to undo that fear, now; he’ll carry that in his bones. They all will.

“Where would I go?” Richie asks.

He sleeps on Stan’s floor instead of walking home through the night.

There’s still snow on the ground the night of the spring dance, though the remaining Losers have all decided to forgo the dance in favor of a movie night in Richie’s basement. On the slate for the evening is a bootleg tape of *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* that Stan scrounged up from his job at the theater and a mountain of snacks pilfered from Mrs. Kaspbrak’s cabinets. Mike’s contribution is a six pack left unattended by one of the farmhands, which the four of them attack with gusto. Richie eats two entire bags of cheese puffs, a feat no one else seems to find impressive, and then promptly falls asleep halfway through the movie.

When he awakes, it’s after midnight and Eddie is the only one left.

“Where’d everybody go?” Richie mumbles, pawing at the couch until he rights himself.

Eddie is sweeping crumbs into his hand from the filthy coffee table. “It’s late. Mike’s getting a ride back to the farm from Stan’s dad so he doesn’t have to go out there alone.”

“How long have I been out?”

Eddie shrugs. “A couple hours. You were out cold.”

“Don’t tell your mother, but I don’t have the stamina that I used to, old sport.” Richie slips into an attempt at a posh accent, grinning lopsidedly when Eddie rolls his eyes.

Richie moves his legs so that Eddie can plop down beside him on the corduroy-covered couch, letting out a sigh in the stillness of the room. It’s only a partially finished basement, with the corners occupied by shelves and discarded tools and haphazardly taped cardboard boxes. Two slit windows peek out into the back garden. The floor is cold concrete, and Richie watches as Eddie brings his bare feet up to drape them on the table instead.

“Can you imagine how many freshmen are jizzing their pants at the dance right now because their dates are showing a little too much elbow?” Richie laughs out, afraid of the silence. Around Eddie, silence is a rare thing, but it always feels volatile, somehow. Brimming with something.

Eddie chews at his thumbnail. “You didn’t ask anyone to the dance?”

“Clearly not,” Richie says, sweeping an arm across his chest. “What woman in her right mind would turn all this down?”

“Did you even consider it?” Eddie is still not looking at him. “Going?”

Richie does not like this line of questioning, or the seriousness with which Eddie is delivering it. But he’s not one to say nothing. “I thought about it,” Richie says. “But then I was just, like, why bother?”

Eddie seems unmoved by the vagueness of this answer. He nods, pensive, then lets out a swear as his teeth tear through the skin of his thumb. A bright red pinprick of blood blossoms. “Fuck,” he says, looking at it for a moment before reaching for his fannypack and the

bandaids within. “Maybe I am delicate.”

He thinks about Eddie being the one to push him off the cliff at the quarry the first time because Richie had been too scared to jump himself. Eddie throwing rocks at Bowers’ gang with a feral scream erupting from his lips. Eddie beating the shit out of a murderous clown. Eddie walking him home many nights since.

“Trust me, Spaghetti, nothing delicate could have come out of something the size of your Mom’s vag—”

“One more word and I’ll stomp you through the crust of the earth,” Eddie says, without missing a beat, and Richie laughs until he cries.

Ben, Beverly, and Bill will be in and out of Derry all summer, they promise. They may even overlap with each other, to some extent. They’ll be a group again, Richie thinks, as school begins to wrap up and the weather turns heavy with heat. And then it happens.

The clubhouse has begun to deteriorate without Ben’s care, but Richie, Mike, and Stan have gathered in its cool depths the Sunday before summer vacation for a game of poker and to share a few packs of cigarettes. It’s a slow afternoon; the light is warm, and Richie finds himself reclining across the dusty floor. So when Eddie arrives late, climbing through the trap door as though descending from heaven, Richie is entirely unprepared for the expression on his face.

“She’s sick,” Eddie chokes out. “She’s actually sick.”

His eyes are red rimmed, his voice a strange monotone. It takes them a little while to coax the whole story out of him, though—like he’s searching for the words, translating them in his head from some language of the dead and dying. It’s his mom, he explains. She’ll need to start chemo immediately. They might have to move in with his uncle in Boston for more advanced treatment if she doesn’t improve in the next few months.

Richie finds that this is a lot to process. His mind snags on Boston

and he feels like he might be vibrating, like he could scream if touched. Eddie's expression is blank and unseeing.

"Let us know if you need anything," Stan says gracefully, and Mike reaches out to rub Eddie's back.

"Eddie," says Richie, voice raw, but when Eddie looks at him with those empty eyes he finds that he can't think of one single thing to say.

Eddie spends most of the first month of summer tending to his mother, and Richie initially tries to keep him company until Mrs. Kaspbrak makes it abundantly clear that she does not want Richie anywhere near her. So Richie takes to dropping in only early in the morning or late at night, when Eddie will meet him on the back porch and accept whatever odds and ends Richie has for him—ice cream, a lukewarm beer, a song ripped off the radio he thinks Eddie would like, a couple of cool looking rocks. Eddie looks tired, now, all the time. Tired and pale, freckles turning ghostly on his face without the sun to warm them.

"Still here?" Eddie says each night, when he finds Richie waiting on the porch, though it's a question Eddie really should be asking himself. Richie wants to inquire about the condition of Mrs. Kaspbrak and its intrinsic connection to the Boston possibility, but the words tangle in his mouth when he sees the slump of Eddie's shoulders, the eternal, downward pull at the corners of his mouth.

They sit for a while on the porch steps, watching moths revolve around the foggy overhead light. Richie talks, because it's what he's good at. Through the stream of words tumbling out of his mouth he looks over at Eddie, looking for evidence of a smile, feeling victorious when he finds one. Eventually, Eddie shuffles close enough to lean his head on Richie's shoulder.

Richie falls silent, frozen in place, heart hammering in his chest.

“Keep talking,” Eddie says, after a moment. Richie rests an unsteady hand on Eddie’s knee and searches desperately for something to say. But then there comes a rustling from the house behind them, the sound of footsteps behind the screen door, and Eddie is pulling away so quickly Richie thinks he might have imagined the whole thing. A cold current of fear slices through him and he wonders, not for the first time, how it can be possible to be so frightened of everything, all the time.

During the long daylight hours he joins Mike on the farm, corralling sheep and shoveling shit. Stan joins them too, the three of them paid by Mike’s grandfather in loose change and free beer to drink in the evenings, when they can sit in the grass on a hill above Derry and look down on the expanse of it. It feels natural to be apart from it all, to be in some adjacent but parallel realm. Always more out than in. But he sits between his two friends and knows that in the last rays of the afternoon sun the tips of their eyelashes and ends of their hair will turn gold in the light.

“I need to get out of this fucking town,” Richie says one afternoon, apropos of nothing, and both Stan and Mike let out a hum in agreement.

“We’ll go together, right?” Richie adds. “The three of us and Eddie, after graduation. Then we’ll pick up Bev and Bill and Ben and just keep going.”

“Keep going where?” Stan asks, looking amused.

“I dunno. Who cares?” Richie says. “Away from here.”

“Okay,” says Mike, laying a warm hand on his shoulder. “Sounds good. I’m on board. We’ll go to Florida.”

“Yes. Florida. Exactly,” Richie agrees, clinking his bottle against Mike’s. “This man gets it.”

Stan leans back in the grass, long legs crossed at the ankles. “And

then we'll all buy a big beach house together, and sleep in one great big king bed, and sing Kumbaya every night—”

“Fuck you, Stanley,” says Richie, aiming a punch at his arm that Stan rolls away from easily, laughing.

In the morning, they're spraying down a reeking stable with the pressure washer when Mike turns to Richie and says fondly, “Eddie would hate this.”

“Yeah,” says Richie, and realizes a moment later that there's something that's probably a bit too dreamy in his voice. Mike smiles at him, a little on the sly, and turns away. A moment later, he tosses aside the hose and crosses the barn to where one of the lambs has been braying for him. When he picks it up, its with such a tenderness that Richie has to look away.

The news comes in and it hits Richie like a freight train: the Kaspbraks are moving into a spare bedroom in Brookline so that Mrs. Kaspbrak can start radiation at Mass General. He saw it coming, he supposes, but somehow that doesn't stop all the air from leaving his body when Eddie tells them on a Saturday morning in the clubhouse. It's the week that Bev is visiting and when she steps in to hug Eddie, it seems only natural that the rest of the Losers should follow suit. Richie's hand glances off the scar on Eddie's forearm and he shivers.

He'll be gone before the end of July. Together, the group helps to pack up his room—there's not much he can take with him, so Eddie tells them to more or less pilfer what they please. But Richie can't bring himself to take anything; everything he picks up feels too heavy in his hands.

Three days before the Kaspbraks are set to drive south, it's just the two of them placing the last of Eddie's stamp collection into a hard backed suitcase. It's not a two-person job; Richie was meant to be home hours ago. But minutes have become precious, to him, at least—and Eddie hasn't kicked him out.

"Well, if seven hundred stamps can't get you laid in Boston, I don't know what will," Richie says, sitting on the top of the suitcase so Eddie can get it to zip.

"Move, asshole," Eddie says, shooing Richie aside so he can stand the bag up straight. "Do you wanna sleep over?"

Richie raises an eyebrow. "Your mom won't mind?"

"She's already in bed," Eddie replies. "She doesn't have to know."

Eddie looks at him, then, and Richie feels so pinned beneath his gaze, so sure of his own transparency, that he finds himself saying, "I should get home, actually, I think—"

"Right," says Eddie, looking away quickly.

"I mean, I would, but—"

"It's fine, Rich." Eddie has crossed the room and is now fumbling beneath his bed, searching for something. Richie angles his face to the ceiling, takes a breath, wonders if there's any way to explain why he doesn't think he can sleep next to Eddie tonight without feeling like he's been lit on fire. Without saying something he can't take back. Their time left is too short; to confess and ruin everything now would be more than he can bear.

"You know, I'll write to you all the time," says Richie, to the ceiling. "I'll tell you all the gossip about Mike and Stan and keep you updated on all my insane sexual conquests. I'll send you a letter every week with minute by minute rundowns of everything I see or do. Emphasis on the *do*."

"No, you won't," Eddie says, surfacing from beneath the bed. "You've never written a letter in your life."

"I'm gonna start now," he says, and wonders if that's true at all. "You'll never be rid of me. Or any of us."

Eddie just hums, unconvinced, then approaches him on soft feet.

"I have something for you," he says. In his palm is a cassette, *Richie*

scrawled in neat cursive on the spine.

“Mixtape? Fuck yeah,” says Richie.

Eddie looks sheepish. “Uh, it’s actually only one song. Sorry. It’s that Sonic Youth one you’ve been trying to record. It came on and I had a tape nearby so I figured—”

It’s unclear if Eddie stops talking because he’s rambling or because Richie is looking at him, mouth agape.

“You hate Sonic Youth,” Richie says.

“Not, like, every song,” says Eddie. “And anyways it’s not my fault that you only like music that sounds like it’s being amplified through an old shoe found at the bottom of a lake.”

Richie laughs, throwing his head back, and Eddie shoves the cassette into his hands. “You’re welcome, asshole,” he says, rolling his eyes, and starts to turn away.

Richie reaches out, grabs Eddie by the elbow to keep him close, but the laugh dies in his throat when he realizes he doesn’t know what to say. “Eddie, I, um—”

“Don’t you have to get home?” Eddie is pulling away from him, shutting down, his eyes on the floor.

“Yeah,” Richie says, after a moment. “Yeah.”

“I’ll see you later.”

Then Richie is at the door and slipping out, the tape grasped tightly in hand.

The night before Eddie is due to leave, the Losers throw him a sendoff party, of sorts, with pizza and beer and ice cream in Stan’s bedroom. But the evening feels heavy beneath the weight of its own

significance; it wraps by ten. Bev's back in Portland but Bill's here for the week and so he joins the last group hug in front of Eddie's now empty house. Then they're waving over their shoulders as they pedal away, leaving Eddie on the front stoop, looking small and alone and inevitable. The ride back to their own houses, as they branch off at intersections and roundabouts, is silent, the night too dark. Richie drops his bike in his front yard and sprints unabashedly for the door.

At midnight, he's still awake, pacing the filthy rug sprawled across his bedroom floor. By this time tomorrow, he thinks, Eddie will be in another state. But the dark outside has a kind of menace to it, now. He slams open the drawer in his bedside table and locates the tape with the Teen Queens song on it, rolls it over in his hands a few times. Hears the harmony echo in the back of his mind, words rolling out. *Eddie, my love.* Sweat trickles down his back; the box fan in the window is of no help. Then he finds the Sonic Youth cassette, shoves it in his walkman, but only makes it halfway through the song before he's vaulting out of the room, down the stairs, and into the night.

Eddie's bedroom window is propped open with a stack of medical encyclopedias. Despite still gripping the Teen Queens cassette tightly in one hand, Richie scales the gutter with ease and pulls himself over the sill in one smooth motion, slithering through the window and onto Eddie's carpet headfirst.

Eddie, perhaps predictably, screams.

"Calm down, it's just me," Richie says, crawling to his feet.

"You can't just fucking break into my house!" Eddie sputters. "You gave me a fucking heart attack."

"And yet you're still alive," Richie says. "Guess your heart's stronger than you thought."

Eddie just shakes his head. His bedside lamp is on, bathing the room in orange light, and he's sitting in the glow of it on the edge of his bed. The sheets are the only thing left in the room, every other trace of Eddie's presence besides himself long packed.

"What are you doing here?" Eddie asks.

The tape in Richie's hand is a burden. There had been a vague plan in his head, he thinks—give Eddie the song, tell him to only listen to it once he's out of the state, and then run for it. It would be a confession, of sorts. A safe one, since he may never see Eddie again to deal with the fallout. It would be a kind of release.

But now that he's here, his fingers won't unfold from around the cassette. Eddie pushes up off the edge of the bed, comes toward him in the sepia light. He's in worn-looking Batman pajamas, which is the last thing Richie notes before he's taking that last step forward and pressing his lips to Eddie's without one thought in his mind at all.

His hand is on Eddie's cheek, his breath close and hot. He opens his own eyes to find Eddie's are closed, and is so shocked that he stumbles back, pulling their mouths apart.

They look at each other for a moment, silent save for their breathing. Eddie licks his bottom lip, eyes unreadable. Then Richie turns on his heel and leaps out the waiting window.

He hits the ground hard. Something clicks and then aches in his ankle; a quick flash of pain and then he's running, the earth thudding hard beneath his feet. The night presses in but he's faster, blood burning in his lips, sweat drying as quickly as it appears on his neck. He looks down and finds the Teen Queens tape still in his hand, the words all unsung. He sprints harder, spreading his arms out as though for takeoff.

But he does look back. Just once, and it's enough. Because he sees Eddie in the window, leaning out into the night, his face a bright moon in the dark.

Author's Note:

the Sonic Youth song is "I Love Her All the Time"
the title of this fic is from the Tennis song of the
same name, which I of course recommend
And the Teen Queens song is, of course, "Eddie My
Love"